

BEYOND SEPARATION

Understanding Coercive Control Post Separation

Too Close to Home Conference | October 13, 2026

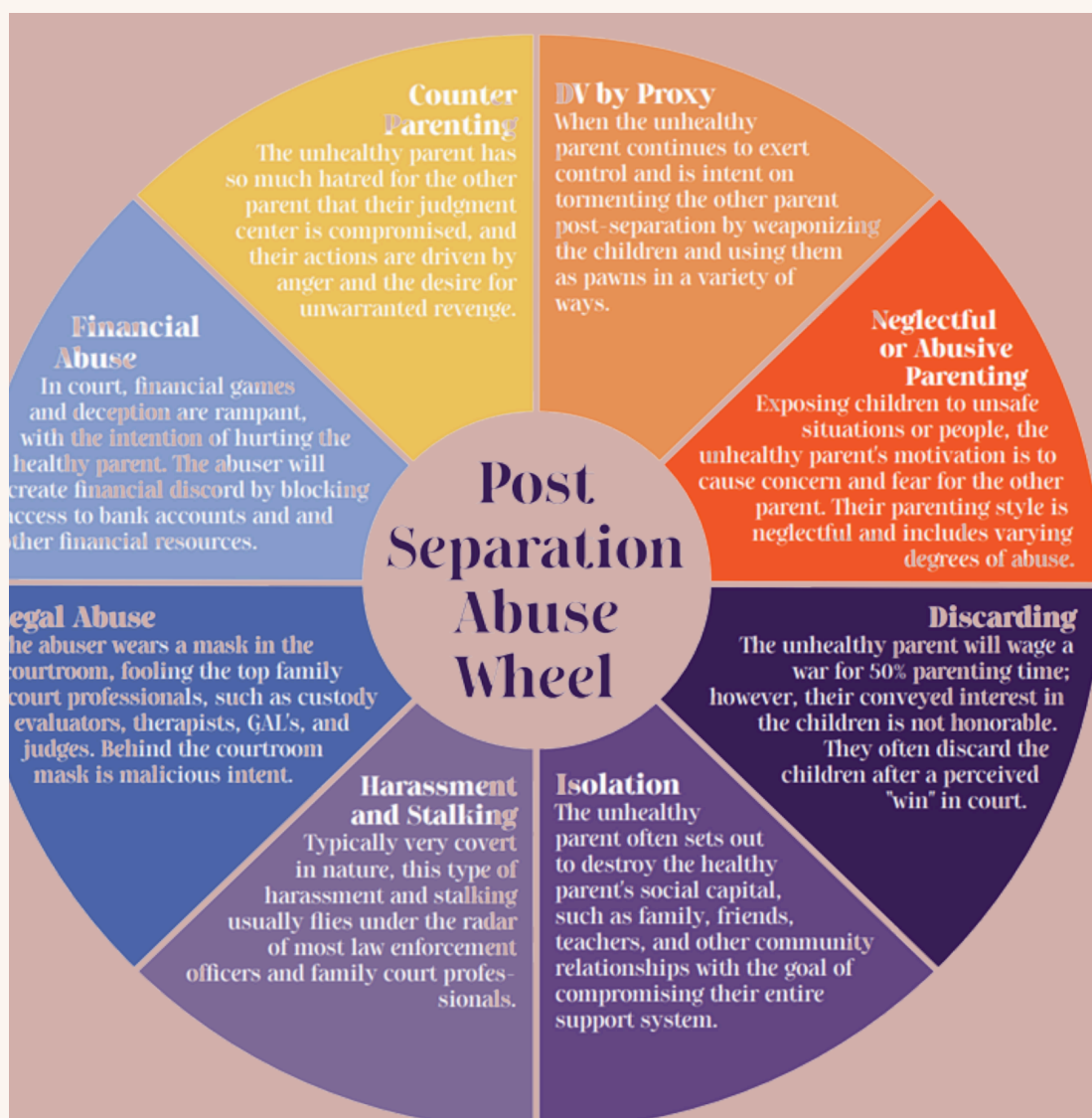
Sybil Cummin, LPC, ACS | Arvada Therapy Solutions | Rising Beyond Power & Control

Coercive Control

An ongoing pattern of domination that restricts another person's autonomy, liberty, and agency, creating entrapment over time.

Post-Separation Abuse

The continuation or escalation of coercive control after separation through tactics such as legal, economic, psychological, systems-based abuse, harassment/stalking, and the use of children.



Post-Separation Abuse Wheel

LOOK FOR THE PATTERN, NOT JUST THE INCIDENT.

Sarah: A Multidisciplinary Case Vignette

Composite educational vignette

Sarah is 39 and has two children, ages 8 and 10. She was married for 12 years and has been divorced for four. During the marriage, control showed up in ways she did not initially identify as abuse: her husband monitored decisions, blocked her from leaving conversations, controlled money and social connections, and made resistance costly. She describes learning that she technically "could" make her own choices - she just knew there would be consequences if she did.

After separation, the tactics changed, but the pattern did not. Joint decision-making has become a recurring source of leverage. Counseling, medical care, extracurricular activities, and routine parenting decisions can turn into prolonged disputes. Sarah receives high volumes of co-parenting-app messages, yet her former partner may stop responding when a decision actually needs to be made. Repeated court filings have depleted her finances, and at times she has been unable to afford counsel.

The pattern now moves through multiple systems. Law-enforcement contacts may be treated as isolated incidents. School and child-focused professionals receive competing narratives. After one child developed concerning sexualized behaviors and made vague statements, a school counselor made a CPS report. The investigation did not result in a finding of maltreatment. Sarah's former partner later used that outcome to argue that her concerns were false and that she was creating problems. Sarah has become increasingly fearful that asking for help will make things worse.

By the time Sarah reaches a professional, she may appear anxious, exhausted, hypervigilant, distrustful, overly detailed, or focused on proving what has happened. Each system may see only one incident. Sarah is living inside the pattern.

Questions That Help Us See the Pattern

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| • What happened before separation? | • What changed after separation? |
| • What systems are involved? | • What seems impossible for the survivor to escape? |
| • What are the recurring themes? | • Who benefits from the way things are now? |
| • What happens when the survivor resists? | • What is the current safety/lethality risk? |

When Systems Become Part of the Pattern

Law Enforcement	Repeated welfare checks • Strategic reporting • Survivor portrayed as "the problem" • Incident-by-incident response misses the pattern
Healthcare	Somatic presentations • Ex-partner controlling information • Repeated visits without obvious injury • "Are you safe at home?" may miss post-separation danger
Mental Health	Professional recruited into competing narratives • Records used strategically • Survivor dysregulation pathologized • Pressure toward "better co-parenting"
Advocacy	Survivor cannot follow the "ideal" safety plan • Conflicting systems requirements • Resource depletion • Repeated crisis
Family Court	Repeated motions • Parenting-plan loopholes • Incident-focused responses • Joint decision-making maintains contact • Financial advantage creates legal advantage
Child / School Systems	Strategic reports • Conflicting parental narratives • Consent withheld • Child behavior interpreted without family context
Child Protective Services	Failure-to-protect expectations • Strategic or repeated reports • Incident-focused investigations • Protective behavior misinterpreted • Ongoing surveillance and scrutiny

When Seeking Help Causes More Harm

Systemic Betrayal	Harm that occurs when systems expected to provide safety, protection, or support instead fail to protect or contribute to further harm.
Epistemic Injury	Harm caused when a person's knowledge, reality, or credibility is dismissed.
Moral Injury	Significant distress and shame caused when deeply held values or beliefs are violated.

Coercive-Control-Informed Support

Safety: look beyond physical safety to ongoing patterns of control • **Autonomy:** avoid replicating the power-and-control dynamics of the abusive partner • **Agency:** help identify what is within the survivor's control • **Discernment:** take perceptions seriously while helping identify patterns and options • **Connection:** reduce isolation and connect across systems when appropriate

Continue the Learning

A place to keep learning after the conference - and to find accessible resources you may want to share with survivors.

Recommended Podcast Episodes & Survivor Resources

The Rising Beyond Podcast



Episode 66: Breaking Down Coercive Control with Kate Amber, MS

Episode 41: Post Separation Abuse Q&A

Episode 190: Changing the System from the Inside: A Law Enforcement Perspective on DV with Captain Eric Threlkeld

Key References Used in This Training

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Are You a Mental Health Clinician?

I created ATS Professional Education to offer practical training for clinicians navigating coercive control, post-separation abuse, family court involvement, and other complex issues we weren't adequately prepared for in grad school.

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